DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 606 FL 026 989

AUTHOR Liu, Yu-zhen
TITLE Names--The Mirror of Society.
PUB DATE 2001-03-30
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the annual Massachusetts State Colleges Graduate Resarch Symposium (Fitchburg, MA, March 30, 2001).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Chinese; Comparative Analysis; Cultural Education; Cultural Influences; *Cultural Relevance; Language Patterns; Lexicology; *Onomastics; Sociocultural Patterns; Sociolinguistics
IDENTIFIERS China; *Personal Names

ABSTRACT

Everyone has a name. Names are more than a symbol or label. The culture of a people finds expression in the language they employ. When personal names are studied historically, philosophically, etymologically, and psychologically the reflection of the social and natural environment can be perceived. This paper focuses on the analysis of the formation of personal names, the semantic meaning and the connotation embedded in names, and the connection between given names and Chinese culture. The paper concludes that names are the mirror of society. (KFT)

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By Yu-zhen Liu
Tianjin Normal University (P. R. China)

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Names---The Mirror of Society

By Yu-zhen Liu

Tianjin Normal University (P. R. China)

Everybody has a name, probably the most personal thing people possess in the world. They accompany them all their lives and go with them to their tombs. Sometimes they are still heard resonating after their death. The names are dear to them. No one can tell how many times they use their names in different situations. They inscribe their names with care on important documents. They scrawl their names hurriedly and illegibly on letters and forms. They are called by the names by people around them every day.

What is a personal name, then? A personal name is a noun phrase intended to achieve individual reference to some person. It is independent of the semantic characteristics of the identifiable linguistic elements out of which it is constructed. In other words, it is only a symbol that gives a person his/her identity. When we address people by their names, we rarely think of the semantic sense or the connotation of the terms by which they are named. But when we have a second look at the names, we will find that they tell more than only a symbol would. The culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ. Personal names, too, reflect the culture of the people who bear the names. When we study the names historically, phonologically and etymologically, we can perceive the reflection of the social and natural environment, social development and political background of the time. In this paper I shall concentrate on the study of personal names (or given names) and the connection between given names and the Chinese culture.

I. Formation of Names

Name can be defined as a word or small group of words used to indicate an individual existence. Personal names are proper nouns which follow the same sort of evolution and transmutation that other language components have, based on common, everyday words. By the formation of names we refer to the process or the act of making a common name a proper noun. Similar to the standardization of languages, personal names undergo a process of selection, elaboration of function and death with indication of rebirth.

1. Selection

In selecting personal names, English speaking people would go through a dictionary of names and pick out a name from the stock that would satisfy them, for English names are institutionalized. Or they choose the names of their dear ones for their babies to show their affection and respect for them. Some would choose their names from the Bible characters. While the Chinese people would go to a large and comprehensive dictionary and look at the characters one by one and try to find a word or phrase which they feel pleased with. Or they would go to famous and well-read scholars and ask for an ideal name for their coming babies. There is no dictionary of names to choose from. The names of nearly all objects around them can be the chosen terms. They might be chosen from the names for creatures, such as tiger, dog, ox, or turtle; plants such as trees, bamboo, grass, or flowers; natural phenomena such as rain, thunder, wind, sun or moon; or the names of places or professions. In selecting names they usually concentrate on the semantic sense, the musical sense and the structure of the words or phrases. For

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example, they choose tiger for the connotation of power, turtle for long life, happiness for good luck and treasure for making money. Some prefer the sense of music: they choose words that rhyme with their surnames, such as *Fang Fang, Yang Yang* and *Chen Chen*. In each name, the first character is the family name and the second character is the first name. They are different characters, but they have the same pronunciation and rhyme with each other. *Nie Er*, the name of a famous Chinese musician, chose his name for its structure. The character of his family name is composed of three ear signs and the character of the given name is composed of one ear. Another given name *Lei* is composed of three stone characters. It is formed after the surname that is composed of one stone character. Selecting names is really hard job. One has to rack one's brain to find a beautiful and satisfactory name.

2. Elaboration of Function

Once the name is chosen for the newborn baby, it starts its function. The family members and relatives call the baby by the name to talk to him, though the baby could not understand them. In the school years his/her classmates and teachers call the kid by the name to speak to him. When he goes to work, his co-workers and bosses would call him by the name to discuss or argue with him. After he learns how to write his name, he writes the name on his exercise books, textbooks and examination papers. As he grows up, he signs on all kinds of documents, contracts and business letters. His name might appear in newspapers if he has some sort of fame. His name will be printed on the front cover of a book if he is a writer. In a word, with the spreading use of his name, the name becomes a symbol or a label that gives him his own identity. The name is used many times a day without accessing the lexical meaning. Whatever meaning the name has, whether a beautiful flower or a powerful animal, it does not come to the user's mind. When the name bearer uses the name, he wants to tell his own identity. He uses it for identification rather than the meaning. When others use the name, they want to distinguish this person from other people. At this stage, all parties use it to refer to the same individual and the expression is sufficient to identify the intended referent correctly for all parties concerned in a particular social context. Thus the expression has undergone the evolution and transmutation and the name is formed, or codified.

3. Death and Rebirth

The name follows the person who bears it all his/her life. It gives the bearer his identity. When his identity disappears, the name disappears. The name would follow the person to his tomb. Personal identity differs from person to person. Some names sound louder than others and they resonate longer. Some names are still heard long after the bearers' death or they could rebirth. By rebirth, we mean that a new meaning has been attached to the personal name. Names do not tell only the identity, but also the major characteristics or the ideology of the people who bear the names. For example, when *Beethoven* is mentioned, we usually refer to the music composed by the great German composer rather than the person himself. When *Hitler* is mentioned, we might refer to the person who started the Second World War, and we might also refer to a notorious person or a much-hated policy. When we discuss *Confucius*, we usually focus on the ideology of the philosopher, rather than on the person himself. When *Zhuge Liang*, the name of the famous politician and militarist in Chinese history, appears in the Chinese saying "Three ordinary leather smiths are equal to a *Zhuge Liang*, it means a wise man. The proper name is used as a common noun. Of course, the common noun has got a new semantic sense, which

indicates the rebirth of the name. The process of naming and the development of names denote the important part that names play in human life, and as part of language, they also reflect human life and culture.

II. Names--the Mirror of Society

A mirror reflects the image of an object. It gives a true representation of facts. By culture we refer to the ideas, arts, customs or whatever a person must know in order to function in a particular society. Just as the culture of a people finds reflection in the language they employ, names, too, give the representation of social development and the social environment they live in. They reflect personal experience, ideas and wishes of the name bearers.

1. The Reflection of the Social Features of the Time

The social life of each era has its marker. Names bear the marker of, or can be regarded as the marker of the social era. China has a long history of feudalism governed by Confucianism. One of Confucian ideas is that "the lord is the lord and the subject is the subject; the father is the father and the son is the son". It means that everyone should fit himself into his place in the hierarchical order. In naming, the expression used by the senior generation relatives should be avoided by the next generation. In other words, it would be considered showing no respect for the older ones if they have the same words for their names. In the Han dynasty, the emperor's name is *Liu Bang*. No one else should choose *Bang* as his name. It is a taboo word to all his subjects. Even those who had already had the name before *Liu Bang* became the emperor had to change their names. While in the English speaking world the opposite is true. They often name their babies after the names of their dear ones to show respect for the older people. Another feature of feudal culture is that men and women have different social status. In Chinese feudal idea, "a woman should obey her father before she gets married; she should obey her husband after she gets married; and she should obey her son after her husband dies". She had no identity of her own. She did not have a formal name before she got married. Even if she had one, it would be considered shameful to make it known. After she got married, the name for her would be her husband's surname plus her father's surname. For example, when her husband's surname is *Zhang* and her father's surname is *Liu*, she would be named as *Zhang Liu Shi*, in which *Shi* means belonging to the family.

Another typical example of names that reflect the social era is found in the names appeared during the Cultural Revolution. In those years, everything had to be revolutionized. Workers, peasants and soldiers were the main force of the revolution. In order to follow the tide, newborn babies were given names associated with the revolution. Many adults changed their names as a token of revolutionizing themselves. Phrases such as "learning from the workers", "learning from the peasants", or "learning from the soldiers" were popular names of the day. Names such as *Wei Dong* (defending *Mao Zedong*), *Yong Hong* or *Ji Hong* (always following the red color which indicates the revolution), *Wen Ge* (the culture revolution), *Yong Jun* (supporting the army), and many more represent the feature of the epoch. In the Department of Foreign Languages of the university where I work, seven of the fifty teachers changed their names, though only five survive. *Chuan-niang*, which means river girl, was changed into *Yan-jun*, which means following the army. Another name, *Cheng-ming*, which means to inherit the

fame, was changed into *Wei-min*, meaning for the people. The students of one of my classes, who entered college in 1986, were mostly born in 1966 or 1967, the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Four of the twenty students have names directly associated with the Cultural Revolution. Names are a marker of the era.

2. The Reflection of Social Status

"A society is any group of people who are drawn together for a certain purpose or purposes."(R. Wardhaugh, 1986). A society may be grouped according to age, profession, sex, social status, education and so on. Each group has its own features. Different groups of people are influenced by different social environment they live in. The feature finds its reflection in the names they carry. People with higher education read more widely and are more influenced by traditional culture. In naming, they select expressions from classic works and poems. They prefer words or expressions with elegant style and rich connotation. For example, the great thinker *Mao Tse-dong* selected *Min* and *Na* for his daughters' names from a line written in Lun Yu. *Min* means quick and *Na* means to accept or take. The line from Lun Yu has the meaning that one should take others' advice and respond decisively. A famous modern Chinese writer has *Bing Xin*, meaning ice heart, for her pen name. This expression is chosen from a line in a famous Tang dynasty poem "If relatives ask, a heart of ice in a jade pot", meaning a clear crystal heart in a pure, clear container, which indicates openness and honest. Well-read persons pick striking terms to express their ambition, feelings, admiration, life, and time, which show that they would pursue high ideals.

We have a different picture in the names of common people. They select simple everyday expression such as cat, dog, or stone for their names. These words denote that it is easy for them to grow up as cats or dogs do. Some choose words or expressions with obvious good common sense, such as happiness, wealth, treasure, jade, precious and so on. Since they are so commonly used, there is a kind of commonness in them. According to census statistical data in Beijing, the most commonly used name for women is *Shu-zhen* which numbers 94,000. *Shu* means kind and mild, and *Zhen* means precious or dear. The second most commonly used name is *Shu-ying*, meaning kind and mild plus wisdom and ability, which numbers 91,000. The distinction between names of people from different social status can be seen clearly from the names in the classical novel "Dreams of the Red Chamber". One can tell whether the person is a master or a servant by just looking at the names. Another classical novel "The Story of the Water Margin", has names representing the social status of the characters. Even the nicknames have class distinctions. People with higher social status have nicknames such as *Jade Dragon*, *Wise Star*, and the like, while people with lower social status have nicknames such as *White Rat*, *Red-haired Ghost*, and so on.

Men and women are different social groups. They play different roles in the society and different requirements are set for them. Women are usually regarded as weak, soft playthings. Their names are often associated with this smallness and softness. Flowers, jewels, pearls, or words indicating quiet and calm are names for women; while men's names indicate power, strength and dominance. Words like steel, iron, tiger or dragon are often the words chosen for men's names. This feature can also be seen from English names. The difference in names reflects the social difference between men and women.

3. The Reflection of Social Life Experience

Personal names are so dear to people that they are closely connected with their social life experience. In turbulent years, many people changed their names to mark their experience for various reasons. The famous painter *Xu Bei-hong* chose his name to mark his bitter life experience. His original name was *Xu Shou-kang* which means long life and healthy. He was from a poor family and was looked down upon by those who had some money, though he was gifted. He felt sad and angry about the situation, so he changed his name to *Bei-hong*, meaning the sad wail of the wild goose, to express his sad feeling and indignation against the injustice. A famous modern writer chose *Mao Dun* for his pen name. *Mao* means spear and *Dun* means shield. The name shows the conflict and the struggle of his time. In our daily life, some people prefer names associated with their profession, to express their ambition and desire. The silver medal winner in swimming used to have *Yong* meaning singing as her name, for her parents would like her to become a famous singer. But she likes swimming very much and she is very good at it. She changes her name to another word *Yong*, meaning swimming, which has the same pronunciation as the word *Yong* for singing, but it is written in a different way. She has become a famous swimmer. A comic dialogue actor changed his name *Xiao-lin*, which means little forest, to *Xiao-lin* which means laughing forest, because he thought that his profession was to make people laugh and he would devote his life to entertaining people.

4. The Reflection of Expectations

Names are a mirror of culture. They reflect the cultural tradition, religious belief and moral standard of a nation or an era. They also reflect people's social behavior. Names embedded people's love, interests, expectations, wishes and desires. In Chinese culture, the male plays the role of keeping the family name going. It would be considered a misfortune if the family did not have a boy. When a girl was born into the family, she would probably be given such names as *Zhao-di*, meaning to beckon a brother, or *Ling-di*, meaning to lead to a brother or bring a brother. Their parents hoped that the next baby would be a boy. The poor people chose *Dog*, *Cat* or *Rat* for their children's names in the hope that their children would grow up easily without being given too much care and would be able to survive all kinds of disaster. The rich and the business men prefer words like happiness, wealth or treasure as their names, hoping that they will get a lot more money and get richer. Before the liberation of China, many revolutionaries were put to death by the Guomindang government. The revolution makers embedded their desires and aspirations in the names of their children. They named their children *Qi-ming*, meaning dawn, or *Ji-zhi*, meaning carry on the will. They hoped that the next generation would carry on the struggle and fight for the liberation of China and bring a happy life to all the people. Now we are in a peaceful situation. Parents or grandparents would like their children to be smart and to have a bright future. They choose words such as *Zhi*, meaning intelligence, *Hui*, meaning wisdom, *Wei*, meaning great, and so on. Everyone has a love of beauty. They embed what they love in their names or the names of the next generation. Take the names of one of my classes for example. There are twenty-one students in the class. They entered college in 1991 and they were born in 1972 or 1973. The semantic meanings of the girls' names are crystal, clever, victory, glorious, gold, peace, beautiful, jade, colorful, equal, robust, clear pure, enthusiasm, crystal clear and prosperous. The boys' names have the meanings of outstanding, courageous, great expectations and wisdom. The connotation of the expressions means more than the semantic meaning of the words chosen. They contain the expectations

and wishes of the parents and grandparents.

Conclusion:

No one is without a name. Names have undergone a long history, starting from the beginning of human civilization. Just as languages follow and promote the development of human society, names as part of language, follow human beings for thousands of years. Names bear the culture and reflect the society. Names promote the development of history and culture. Names, as codes of personal identity, reveal the cultural tradition, ideas of evaluation, moral standards, social psychology, customs and habits. Names are the mirror of society.

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Abstract

Names—The Mirror of Society

Everyone has a name. Probably it is the most personal thing people possess in their lives. Names are so dear to them that they follow them all their lives. What is a personal name? A personal name is a noun phrase that is intended to achieve individual reference to some person. It is a code that is independent of the semantic characteristics of the identifiable linguistic elements out of which it is constructed. But when we have a second look at the names, we shall find that they tell more than only a symbol. The culture of a people finds its reflection in the language they employ. The same goes with names. Personal names reflect the culture of the people who bear the names. When we study personal names historically, philosophically, etymologically and psychologically we can perceive the reflection of social and natural environment, social development, and political background. In this paper I shall concentrate on the analysis of the formation of personal names, the semantic meaning and the connotation embedded in the names and the connection between given names and Chinese culture. The paper shall lead to the conclusion that names are the mirror of society.

About the author:

Yu-zhen Liu is a Professor of English at Tianjin Normal University of China and a Visiting Professor at Fitchburg State College in 1998—1999 and a Visiting Professor at Polytechnic University in 1999--2000. She has been teaching English since 1965. From 1985 to 1987 she was a Visiting Scholar at Oxford University Department of Educational Studies, Britain, having postgraduate training in education and sociolinguistics. Now she is responsible for supervision of senior and MA students in the English Department of Tianjin Normal University. She specializes in Sociolinguistics and does research in cross culture issues in language education. She has authored many publications including *English In Cultural Exchange* (1998), *Middle School Teachers' Perceptions of What They Need To Teach English* (1997), *A Study of Cultural Connotations of English Names* (1996), and *Short Phrases in Everyday English* (1995).

Name: Yu-zhen Liu

Address: English Department, Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, 300074, P. R. China

E-mail: **xym@mail.tjnu.edu.cn**